ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"I'm a security professional, a counselor, a leader, and sometimes a father figure": Transformative social emotional learning through the eyes of school security professionals

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Abstract

Schools are increasingly hiring full-time, unarmed school security professionals (SSPs), who are different from School Resource Officers (SROs), to help facilitate safe and supportive school climates. However, there is a paucity of literature about how they describe and engage with social emotional learning (SEL), particularly equity-focused or transformative SEL. The current study is a secondary data analysis using qualitative responses to content embedded in two online professional development (PD) modules created for school security: SEL and cultural competence (CC). Forty-eight SSPs completed the SEL module and 18 of these SSPs also completed the CC module. Informed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's transformative SEL literature, researchers sought to understand how SSPs describe SEL and how they apply transformative SEL in their work. A qualitative transcript analysis was performed, and transformative SEL's five subthemes were identified through this iterative process: working collaboratively, equity and inclusion, cultural humility, ties to identity, and advocacy. Findings demonstrated that SSPs who completed the modules apply transformative SEL principles in various, overlapping ways, illustrating their capacity to support student SEL. However, some SSPs struggled to make ties to their own identity, highlighting the need for widespread training and additional emphasis on self-awareness in transformative SEL PD.

KEYWORDS
advocacy, cultural humility, equity, identity, schools, SEL

Highlights
- School security professionals (SSPs) describe using social emotional learning (SEL) competencies and their overlap.
- SSPs emphasize the importance of building relationships with students
- SSPs state importance of involving the community in SEL efforts.
- SSPs describe applying equity-focused SEL in their role in multiple ways.

INTRODUCTION

Social emotional learning (SEL) has been regarded as an effective intervention for schools, showing positive changes in both social and academic student outcomes (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007; Durlak et al., 2011). A key tenet of successful SEL implementation is ongoing community support and participation. Schools are unique systems with a variety of key stakeholders, each of whom must be involved in creating an environment where all students feel safe and valued (Espelage et al., 2022). While significant attention has been focused on the SEL competencies of students, teachers, and administrators, key members of the school community, such as school security, are often left out of SEL initiatives in schools (Espelage et al., 2020). Security staff are an important part of the school environment who have a unique perspective and whose actions shape student behavior and discipline outcomes, which has a significant impact on school climate and student wellbeing, especially among students of Color (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Despite

their importance, school security staff have been neglected in the research. The level of variability between and within school districts as it relates to the roles and responsibilities of security staff has also led to inconsistent and sometimes nonexistent professional development (PD) opportunities related to youth development and evidence-based practices (Espelage et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2021).

Given the need for school security staff to receive youth-related training to effectively work with students (Campisi, 2019), Espelage et al. (2020) developed four PD modules for School Resource Officers (SROs) and other school security professionals (SSPs) on trauma-informed care, SEL, restorative problem-solving, and cultural competence (CC). The current study includes data from this larger collection of modules. More specifically, this study includes qualitative analyses of the SSPs' responses to prompts embedded within two of the modules: SEL and CC, to further our understanding of how to effectively include security personnel in schoolwide SEL initiatives.

Equity-focused SEL

While SEL is marketed as a strategy for all youth, some scholars have criticized its lack of explicit consideration of equity and culture, and how the broader context of education and society impact youths' experiences (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Simmons, 2019). The recent focus on the intersection of SEL and equity emphasizes the need for direct connections between individual cultural assets and social and emotional development (Jagers et al., 2019). Thus, in 2020 the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) modified their definition of SEL to include elements of transformative or equity-focused SEL and called for systemic approaches to SEL implementation. Transformative SEL has been defined as "a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences; learn to critically examine root causes of inequity; and develop collaborative solutions to community and social problems" (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 2). This framework acknowledges that social and emotional competencies differ by culture, and therefore intentionally views SEL through a culturally responsive, equity-focused lens.

The updated definition incorporates specific language to highlight the need for SEL that centers school-family-community partnerships in promoting equity in education and promotes student agency while recognizing that their environment shapes their academic, social, and emotional growth (see Table 1 for updated version of the CASEL SEL definition). SEL competencies are developed and expressed in various ways depending on biological (e.g., developmental stages) and social (e.g., race, class, gender, country, etc.) characteristics. Therefore, it is critical to utilize a form of SEL that transforms individuals and institutions in ways that support optimal human development and functioning for children and adults regardless of their abilities, circumstances, or backgrounds (e.g., Jagers, 2016; Jagers et al., 2018).

SEL and equity for school safety

Historically, schools in the United States have reinforced inequitable social structures by supporting ableist, middle-class American culture and offering culturally relevant education for White middle-income children and youth (Jagers et al., 2019). Students who diverge from this normative standard, such as those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as those with disabilities often experience unreasonably low expectations, microaggressions, discrimination, and implicit biases from peers and adults (Allen et al., 2013). These experiences at school reproduce and exacerbate existing educational, social, and economic inequities that threaten the physical and psychological safety of all students. In addition to the inequitable social structures that exist within schools, there has also been an overreliance on traditionally punitive disciplinary measures such as suspensions and expulsions that disproportionately impact students of Color and students with disabilities (Curran, 2016; Fabelo et al., 2011). Suspensions and expulsions not only interrupt a student's education by increasing the likelihood of repeating a grade or dropping out, but these practices also elevate the risk of future involvement with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). Lamont et al. (2013) on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) have disseminated reports on the ineffectiveness and risks associated with punitive disciplinary practices and have recommended that they are

TABLE 1 CASEL's previous and current definitions of SEL

Previous SEL definition	2020 SEL definition update
"Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions."	"SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020)."

Abbreviation: CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

used as a last resort. Punitive disciplinary practices (e.g., expulsions, arrests) have not been effective at reducing school violence. Instead, they are responsible for disproportionally funneling students of Color and students with disabilities through the school-to-prison pipeline (González, 2012; Krezmien et al., 2006), taking away their right to a safe and equitable education. While school discipline is shaped by all school staff, security personnel are an integral part of this process as roughly half of all US school-based crimes are reported to police (Wang et al., 2020).

The discourses around police brutality against Black and Brown communities has become more visible through the active involvement of antiracist social justice movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter) on social media. As a result, many school districts employing school security are rethinking how to ensure the physical and psychological safety of all students, and some (e.g., Minneapolis, Denver, and Oakland) have ended their contracts with police departments and have sought alternative providers (e.g., counselors, social workers) to support school safety efforts (Harris, 2020). Though some schools are currently reconsidering their safety plans, many will continue to employ school security; thus, it is imperative that they have the necessary skills to successfully protect and advocate for a diverse student body.

Implementation and adoption of SEL and equity in education

Educational equity means that every student has educational resources when they need it, regardless of ability, race, gender, ethnicity, language, family background, or family income (The Aspen Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2017). Given that inequity is rooted in systemic racism and injustice, CASEL recommends a school-wide systemic approach to SEL for promoting equity in education (Oberle et al., 2016). This approach integrates SEL into every level of the school context to foster an environment where all students feel safe, valued, and supported in every aspect of their educational experience. Thus, the school community is better equipped to address a variety of student needs (New York State Education Department, 2019; Oberle et al., 2016). While there have been several studies focused on how to facilitate teacher understanding and practices of SEL in classrooms and schools (Blewitt et al., 2020; CASEL, n.d.; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), none have focused on how to best include SEL and equity for school security.

Despite its nascency, the research on SEL as a tool to minimize reliance on traditional exclusionary and punitive approaches to discipline is promising. Gregory and Fergus (2017) found that school districts implementing SEL-oriented policies (e.g., SEL practices and curriculum, restorative justice, MTSS, etc.) saw a significant reduction in the use of exclusionary discipline. Additionally, SEL increases competencies such as self-awareness and relationships skills, which may help staff reflect on their own implicit biases, potentially elucidating and mitigating the discrepancies in the current disciplinary approaches. Although SEL shows promise as an effective intervention, Gregory and Fergus (2017) identified two of the current barriers to effectively incorporating SEL to reduce disciplinary disparities. First, there is a lack of understanding of how a group's cultural power and privilege reinforce traditional systemic biases. Second, many SEL programs do not include adult SEL, which is critical to the implementation of school-wide SEL. These findings point to a need for widely implemented equity informed adult SEL. Research findings have shown the importance of adult SEL on improving student outcomes. For example, one recent study found that when teachers receive training that promotes their social-emotional competencies, they tend to use more constructive and supportive strategies when they encounter aggressive behavior in their classroom (Poulou, 2017). Findings also suggest that teachers' supportive strategies may in turn improve the learning environment for students (Poulou, 2017). By educating SSPs on CC and SEL, they can be better equipped to create a safe and inclusive school climate for all students.

School security as change agents

US schools have introduced a variety of professionals to promote school safety and enforce school discipline, including SROs and SSPs (Javdani, 2019). SROs and other SSPs are incredibly common in schools with 56.5% of schools having at least one security person in the 2015–2016 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Though both SROs and SSPs are in place to prevent and intervene in instances of school violence, there are distinct differences between these groups (Espelage et al., 2021; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). SROs are the most commonly utilized school security personnel. SROs are sworn law enforcement officers who are usually contracted by their local police department to split their time between a school or multiple schools and other local police calls (Espelage et al., 2021). Given their role as police officers, SROs step into schools armed and uniformed, which can be traumatic for students who have had prior dealings with the police or who fear police brutality or mistreatment (Turner & Beneke, 2020). SROs also do not receive specific training on working with students. Ryan et al. (2018) found that 76% of states do not mandate additional training on working with youth beyond what they receive in the police academy, which typically comprises less than one percent of total training. Research on the effectiveness of SROs for school safety is inconclusive, with several studies pointing to active harms to the student body. Theriot (2016) found that greater interactions between students and SROs were related to less school connectedness and exposure to more school violence (Theriot, 2016). A meta-analysis on SROs and exclusionary discipline in US high schools found that the presence of SROs in high schools was associated with higher rates of exclusionary discipline (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016), which has been found to exacerbate educational inequity and disproportionately impact students of Color, low-income students, and students with disabilities (Curran, 2016).

Alternatively, this paper specifically focuses on the experiences of SSPs which includes positions such as safety officers, campus monitors, and safety coordinators. SSPs are hired and trained by individual school districts, so they are not current law enforcement employees and do not typically carry firearms (Espelage et al., 2021). This may result in their presence being less traumatic for students of Color and other marginalized groups. SSPs typically work full-time exclusively in the school district, giving them more time to immerse themselves in the culture of a school and form relationships with the staff, students, and families. As school district employees SSPs receive training as required by the school or district, yet there is inconsistency with how training is implemented across states (Campisi, 2019). Little research exists on the role of SSPs as most research discussing school security either excludes these positions altogether or includes them with SROs, despite the key differences in their roles. Security personnel often face challenges with role confusion, from balancing their need to discipline and protect students, while also wanting to serve as a mentor or trusted adult. Both roles are incredibly important and as such, SSPs must be given the tools to fulfill them both effectively. Due to their role as permanent, unarmed, nonpolice affiliated school staff, SSPs are uniquely positioned to utilize SEL in their work by building meaningful relationships with students and the community at large, and encouraging changes to school discipline policies. Because they are often excluded, we are unaware of any research that highlights SSPs' perspectives on SEL as well as their perceptions of how their role may contribute to an equity-focused school environment. As such, the current study examines qualitative, typed responses related to content in two online modules (SEL and CC) to understand how SSPs define SEL and how they are applying these skills with a focus on CC and equity. Given the increased need for schoolwide SEL, SSPSs should be trained in how to utilize SEL in their work with students to reduce bias in discipline and create a psychologically and physically safe environment for all students.

Current study

The current study introduced and expanded on the role of SEL in promoting equity in education from the perspective of SSPs. The equity-focused, transformative SEL lens used in this paper was inspired by the work of Jagers et al. (2019). This work describes the importance of assessing the intersectionality of identity, culture, within SEL and frames findings using the transformative SEL principles of working collaboratively, equity and inclusion, cultural humility, ties to identity, and advocacy. Additionally, based on this intersectionality, this study utilized a qualitative approach to examine the typed training log responses of a sample of SSPs from two modules: SEL ($n = 48$) and CC ($n = 18$). These modules were created before the formal definition of transformative SEL, so the CC module allows us to understand how participants in this study understood and engaged with various aspects of race, ethnicity, and culture in their work, serving as a proxy for culturally informed, or transformative SEL. We sought to understand how SSPs related to and engaged with the content in the modules (e.g., reflections on using these practices with students) rather than their perceptions of the modules themselves. By providing SSPs with an introduction to SEL and cultural competencies we expected they would be able to make meaningful reflections with the training log questions resulting in more salient responses that would give insight as to how SSPs can support schoolwide SEL. Codes used for this paper were adapted from Jagers et al. (2019) and reflect the transformative SEL principles that all adults should employ for meaningful schoolwide SEL implementation. Oftentimes, interventions for adults in the school building are inclusive of teachers and administrators, but this study draws attention to the fact that SSPs are district-employed adults who are critical members of the school community with the potential to promote equity and model SEL competencies with students.

The current study used responses from two PD modules, SEL and CC, to better understand the perspectives of SSPs as it relates to their understanding of and engagement with principles of transformative SEL in their work with students. Specifically, we aimed to address the following research questions: (1) How do SSPs describe SEL? and (2) How have SSPs applied principles of transformative SEL in their work with students?

METHODS

This study was approved by the Principal Investigator's university Institutional Review Board (IRB) and complied with American Psychological Association's (2016) ethical principles.

This research was conducted as part of a larger study assessing engagement with the full PD training (four modules) for SROs and SSPs, the development of the modules used in the current study are described in-depth in a separate publication (Espelage et al., 2020, 2021). The qualitative data from SSPs was gathered from their responses to the reflection training log questions that were asked throughout the SEL and CC online modules.

Participants

The qualitative data examined in this study were drawn from a pilot evaluation of two of the four online PD modules focused on SEL and CC. SSPs were recruited from one large urban school district in the Southeastern United States, and a total of 140 SSPs were invited to participate. Eligible participants received a recruitment flier via email that gave them details of the study and invited them to participate, as well as two follow-up reminder emails. Ninety-six SSPs agreed to participate in the online PD. The recruitment flier explained that each cohort would receive the same number of PD modules and the same compensation, and that only the start and end date of the online PD modules would differ.

Participants were self-selected to begin the online modules during an in-person training in early (June 2019) or late summer (August 2019) by logging into their district's e-learning website. Participants completed the SEL module in person, under the guidance of research staff and were given access to the remaining online modules to complete at their own pace following the in-person training. Since modules were completed independently, the level of participation and completion varied. Additionally, timing of the modules contributed to attrition. Forty-eight SSPs completed the SEL module and 18 of those participants also completed the CC module. In addition to viewing the modules, SSPs were asked to complete three surveys administered as part of the larger study, one pretest survey (before they started the modules), one midpoint survey (after the completion of the first two modules, including SEL), and one posttest survey (after the completion of four modules, including CC). Participants were compensated with a $40 Amazon gift card per survey and the maximum amount a participant was compensated across all three surveys was $120. Participants were prompted to answer training logs throughout the modules but could skip a training log at any time. Incentives were only given for completing the survey not for completing training logs.

Participants worked in elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the district, however, the percentage that worked in elementary, middle, and high schools is unknown. Demographic data were available for all SSPs who participated in the larger study, but it was impossible to disaggregate the demographics from the written responses that were extracted from the two modules. However, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of the overall sample in the larger study for context and the valuable contribution of a traditionally underrepresented perspective in a profession that is predominantly White (Kurtz et al., 2018). The larger study included 96 SSPs with 1–32 years ($M = 10.8$) years of experience. The sample was 74% male and 26% female and ranged from 31 to 70 years of age. Seventy-six percent of participants identified as African-American/Black, 10% as White, 9% as Hispanic/Latino, and 5% identified as Multiracial. Regarding educational attainment, 16% had a high school degree, 4% had technical or vocational training, 40% had attended some college, 30% had a bachelor's degree, and 10% had a graduate degree. To better understand the context of students served in the district, the following information describes the racial composition of the student body and income level. About 36% of students in this district identify as White, 28% as Black, 30% as Hispanic/Latino, 4% as Asian, 2% as two or more races, and 1% as some other race. Additionally, about 15.4% of student's family income is below the poverty line.

Study design

Data were extracted from the SEL and CC modules of the training. SSPs were prompted throughout the two modules to respond to a total of 17 training logs with questions about the course material. In the SEL module, participants learned more about the five SEL competencies, why they are important, and how to incorporate them into their daily work in schools. The SEL module included 10 training logs consisting of questions such as "In what ways do you think practicing SEL skills can contribute to promoting psychological (or emotional) safety?" The CC module discussed the importance of developing cultural knowledge, understanding manifestations of cultural differences, and fostering a sense of advocacy as it relates to security working with diverse students. The CC module included seven training logs with questions such as "In your previous experiences, you may have been exposed to the word 'intersectionality.' What does this word mean to you? What do you think it means?" (see Supporting Information Table for a complete list of training log questions). Training logs for the SEL module were completed during an in-person session where researchers were available to provide technological assistance and clarify as needed. The CC module was completed online at home. Modules and training log questions were asynchronous and took participants approximately 90–120 min to complete. These questions served as learning checkpoints, introductions to the next topic, and prompts to reflect on personal experiences, videos, and realistic scenarios. Some training logs introduced a scenario or a video and then participants were asked how they would respond. Additional details regarding the development of these modules and its components are described in another publication (Espelage et al., 2020).

Research team

The research team included six researchers: one PI, one qualitative researcher, one lab coordinator, and three graduate-level research assistants. All members of the team participated in coding, conceptualizing, and writing, and three members of the team were involved during the original data collection process and development of the modules. The leading qualitative research methodologist is a former professor and identifies as a Brown, disabled woman, the PI is a professor and quantitative school safety researcher who identifies as a White female, the lab coordinator has a Master of Professional Studies in Criminal Justice Policy and Administration and identifies as a White female, and the graduate assistants identify as a Latina female in a school psychology PhD program, a Turkish female in a counseling psychology PhD program, and a White female with Palestinian roots in a counselor education master's program. Although none of the researchers have experience working as a SSP, they all have extensive experience working in schools and are familiar with school safety, school discipline, SEL, and CC, and some have experience working with law enforcement. These emic and etic perspectives were crucial to the qualitative methods used (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Analytic approach

The participant data analyzed included all responses to the 17 training log questions from the SEL and CC

modules. As the research team worked on the coding structure and coding of these data and interpretation, they created research memos to capture these discussions and thinking. All coding and memoing took place using a combination of Google Docs and Google Sheets. The research team did an initial review of the deidentified responses to the 17 training logs and created memos with initial reactions to the data. While all training logs were reviewed, salient quotes were identified in 10 of the logs which are included in this discussion. A structured template informed by Koenig et al. (2016) was developed to standardize how the participant's open-ended responses from the training logs were synthesized. All responses to questions were transferred onto structured templates and organized by topic. This then served as the basis for the coding and thematic analysis process that followed.

To do so, Hamilton's Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) was utilized (Beebe, 2001). RAP is an intensive, team-based qualitative inquiry using triangulation, iterative data analysis, and additional data collection to quickly develop a preliminary understanding of a situation from the insider's perspective (Beebe, 2001). This was used intentionally first to guide the team to the most salient stories to be told from these data. Using this process, the following five steps were completed: (1) creation of a neutral domain name that corresponds with each open-response question, (2) creation of a summary template, (3) pilot of the summary template to assess its usability, relevance, and so forth, and refine as needed, (4) distribution of open-ended comments across the team and creation of a summary after consistency was established across the team of summarizers, (5) transfer of the summaries into a matrix (topic × site). Still, the research team utilized internal research memos to facilitate collaboration and to resolve disagreements. This reorganization of the participant data provided a helpful picture of the most salient stories that existed from these data and provided a strong foundation for our next coding process to dive deeper into these data.

A second round of structural coding as outlined by Saldaña (2015) was conducted specific to the key aspects of the definition of transformative SEL. Data consisted of open-ended participant responses from questions in the SEL and CC training modules. Important to note, to accentuate the aspects of these responses that show the application of transformative SEL principles, we defined these aspects of SEL as summarized in Table 2. While these constructs have unique definitions and may occur independently, they are frequently interrelated and are often most robust and salient when used in conjunction to facilitate transformative SEL.

RESULTS

To understand how SSPs define and engage with principles of SEL, results are organized into a general overview of SEL principles and then more specifically the principles of transformative SEL inspired by the work of Jagers et al. (2019) including working collaboratively, equity and inclusion, cultural humility, ties to identity, and advocacy. A participant ID is provided after each comment, as well as the corresponding module (SEL or CC) and training log question participants are responding to (e.g., T3 represents training log number three). Quotes presented were written by participants and edited for common typos to improve readability and shortened

TABLE 2 Structural code definitions

Structural code	Definition
Equity/inclusion	Examining factors (from individual beliefs and thoughts to structural policies) within the education system that create and continue to exacerbate inequitable access to educational activities and rigor, and intentionally changing these factors to create equitable access and opportunities regardless of identity. School staff can demonstrate equity and inclusion throughout all five SEL competencies.
Cultural humility	The importance of understanding and reflecting on the effects of culture on our own experiences and the experiences of others. This involves acknowledging that others are the expert of their own culture and recognizing that culture and cultural assets are constantly changing. School staff can demonstrate cultural humility primarily through practicing self and social awareness in their interactions with other adults and students, but also applies to other competencies.
Working collaboratively	The act of working together to build relationships and/or problem-solve regardless of identity and role. This involves co-constructive community approaches to resolving conflict and establishing trust. School staff can demonstrate working collaboratively primarily in their relationship skills, but it can also be applied to other SEL competencies.
Ties to identity[a]	Identity influences every aspect of life. Ties to identity involves fostering awareness of an individual's own identity and the identity of others and how it impacts learning, experiences, and development. School staff can demonstrate ties to identity primarily through self and social awareness, but it can also be applied to other SEL competencies.
Advocacy	Deliberate, intentional, continuous acts promoting and advancing the path to equity and inclusion for all people, especially those with marginalized identities, who are often oppressed in schools. It is not enough to understand inequities, as organized planning and action must take place to create change. School staff can demonstrate advocacy through self and social awareness and responsible decision-making, but it can also be applied to other SEL competencies.

Abbreviation: SEL, social emotional learning

[a]Identities include race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, disabilities, socioeconomic status, age, religion, and size.

for length in some places, however, edits were kept minimal to preserve participants' voices. Although some participant responses could fit into more than one subtheme (e.g., working collaboratively and cultural humility), the research team engaged in extensive discussions during data analysis to decide which subtheme to assign to each quote. However, overlap in these themes was common and was interpreted by researchers as a positive attribute because transformative SEL principles should not operate independently, and instead must work together to foster equity-centered SEL.

General SEL

SSPs' responses reflected strategies they use to practice various social emotional competencies and how utilizing these social emotional competencies impacts their relationships with students, school staff, and community members. When describing self-management and responsible decision-making, SSPs mentioned that the ability to slow down and regulate their own emotions helps de-escalate situations. Specifically, one SSP shared, "I believe that it is important to 'practice the pause.' Take a breath, relax and think about your response. These actions will certainly keep the situation from escalating." (SSP18, SEL, T7). Other SSPs spoke to how intertwined SEL competencies are, adding how practicing them is crucial for building positive relationships:

> Responsible decision making requires the ability [to] cool down before you act or speak when you see that you are upset about an issue or situation. The way you respond can make a difference on the future direction of the relationship you have or are trying to build with someone. (SSP45, SEL, T7)

Additionally, SSPs highlighted the importance of relationship skills when interacting with students and how it helps improve their connections. One SSP shared, "When you understand the different challenges that students face, it helps you connect with them on an emotional level. This builds trust and allows you to have a more positive relationship with the students on your campus." (SSP45, SEL, T9). SSPs commonly mentioned the importance of building meaningful relationships with students. Some went a step further and described the importance of alliance and collaboration with school and community members to further strengthen these relationships. For instance, when asked how SEL connects with their work, one SSP described how relationship-building should transcend beyond the school community. Specifically, they said, "It is so important that we connect with the students, staff, and community to help everyone feel the learning environment is safe." (SSP18, SEL, T9). While the ways in which SSPs use general SEL competencies to build relationships with students was salient in SSP narratives, other more complex facets of transformative SEL were more subtle.

Transformative SEL principles

In addition to their general practice of SEL, SSPs described various ways of implementing a culturally responsive lens in applying SEL. For example, SSPs' narratives highlighted the importance of working collaboratively, equity and inclusion, cultural humility, ties to identity, and advocacy, which are all principles that are aligned with a transformative SEL framework.

Working collaboratively

The principle working collaboratively involves co-constructed approaches to problem-solving, resolving conflict, and/or building trust. This principle is crucial to transformative SEL as every student has unique needs, and involving a variety of school staff in the problem-solving process promotes equity. SSPs describe this principle as a mechanism to promote relationship skills and encourage responsible decision-making. When asked to reflect on their relationship skills, positive and negative encounters they have had, and what helps promote positive relationships, one SSP expressed having an established rapport and treating students "as human" consistently works. They shared:

> Due to me having a good rapport with the majority of the students, whenever they get out of control 99.9% I can calm them down and talk with and go on a stress walk to let them breath and vent to me. I've also had some negative encounters to where we had to restrain some students for fighting and trying to cause bodily harm to other students. How I approach the situation and calmly talking with the individuals and treating them as human. I approach with a smile, it sort of relax them instead of having them uptight in a fight or flight mode. (SSP31, SEL, T6)

This SSP also reflected on their current use of transformative SEL skills, and explained how they could enhance their SEL competencies by co-creating solutions with students in the future:

> I use them every day without knowing I was using them. On a daily basis we constantly breaking up fights, or a kid is running out the class cursing staff or another student, I would ask what's going on, and come with me and talk. Now I won't ask the students what's wrong, as I do sometimes, I always try to come up with a solution for the student, now we will come up with one together. It will help me be more compassionate with the students. (SSP31, SEL, T10)

SSPs explicitly described how they involve students in the process of finding solutions and treating them with respect, which is crucial to working collaboratively. SSPs are often overlooked by other adults as important

members of the school community. When reflecting on their relationship skills, one SSP shared the tension of these relationships with the other adults in the school building by stating, "I try to engage others letting them know I'm here to assist when needed. But as a security officer at times teachers, administrators and parents don't see us as equals." (SSP50, SEL, T6). To truly work collaboratively, SSPs and their perspectives need to be heard and considered by other adults. Establishing an inclusive school community that values all adults and encourages collective problem-solving can help foster stronger relationships between students and adults.

Equity and inclusion

The principle of equity and inclusion in education involves examining factors that contribute to inequities and intentionally changing these factors to create opportunities that are fair for students of all backgrounds. One SSP highlighted the need for equity by acknowledging the discrimination students face based on how others perceive their identities, and how this can negatively impact students. They also used this knowledge to inform how they should interact with students:

> I understand how a student would feel when facing being a part of a majority group, it's not right because when you're being judged based on looks, skin, color, clothes, speech or your religious belief, it can be hard sometimes for a student because it can impact their life in a bad way. So when you're dealing with students or adults you show treat them in a way you would want your kids or yourself to be treated. (SSP26, SEL, T4)

One SSP described how promoting equity and inclusion is an active and continuous process and should be practiced beyond their role as a SSP:

> I aspire to continue and try to change the perspectives of others. I do not condone racism at all and I try to instill this in my son and students. We are to accept everyone no matter their race and treat them as if we would want to be treated. Making a small change can make a larger change in the future. (SSP23, CC, T3)

Additionally, one SSP reflected on the result of their implicit bias test and stated that understanding and addressing one's own biases is crucial in their work with students:

> I took all of the tests and it taught me that we all have some type of implicit bias. We learn a lot from the culture around us, the people we talk to, hang out with, the things we read, and the places we go. Even the type of music we listen to can have a small

influence on our thinking. It is important to be aware of your surroundings and not let our biases affect those we are trying to help and protect. (SSP55, SEL, T3)

Furthermore, SSPs illustrate that actions are needed to take place to promote equity. In the CC module, one SSP emphasized the importance of paying attention to students' different identities to build positive relationships with them:

> When I received a call to remove a student from a classroom, I showed up to that room and did that. I had never had an encounter with the student so I was unsure as to why they would be removed. As I spoke with the student, I asked them what pronoun they prefer to be referred to as and they told me. Once I had asked that and I was able to establish a rapport with the student and then find out as to why they were called to be removed. The student was happy that I took the time to ask what pronoun they preferred to be referred to as and things were smooth sailing from there on. (SSP23, CC, T7)

When responding to a training log scenario about Thomas, a member of the Gender and Sexuality Alliance who had repeatedly heard homophobic comments from students and a teacher, one SSP acknowledged the vitality of their roles as SSPs and further illuminated how actions toward equity and inclusion overlap with advocacy by saying:

> When people openly make jokes or unwanted remarks about gay or lesbian students or adults, students are less likely to open up about the way they feel because trust is a huge part of this communication. An SRO can be a strong supporter in this case but he or she can not only address the students but also the adults, restoring some of the confidence in Thomas that not everyone feels this way. (SSP45, CC, T4)

Cultural humility

The principle of cultural humility is characterized by social awareness, specifically, understanding the effects of culture in our lives and others, respecting that others are the experts of their own culture, and recognizing that culture and cultural assets are constantly evolving. One SSP illustrated cultural humility by saying: "Being white and not living in a black community you cannot understand what it feels like to be black because your struggles are different." (SSP27, CC, T3). One SSP utilized cultural humility through self and social awareness, emphasizing the importance of understanding an individual's culture:

> I have many identities when dealing with students; I'm a security professional, a counselor, a leader, and sometimes a father figure. These identities change daily with each student and each situation. For example, I had a young student who came to me for advice on how to deal with her father who did not trust her. After getting a small detail I understood why the father felt the way he did and it had a great deal to do with their culture. Although my culture was different in some ways, I was able to steer her on a path that would eventually bring her closer to her father. (SSP45, CC, T5)

This comment also illustrates equity and inclusion by tailoring each "identity" or response differently based on the student and situation. Additionally, in this particular situation, the SSP highlights that understanding the student's culture was necessary to assist the student. It is important to note that while cultural humility is essential for SSPs work, by itself, it is not sufficient to promote an emotionally safe environment for students. SSPs should also be aware of their own identities and how they might impact students and their relationships with them. Thus, when interacting with students, making connections, and tying interactions with students back to their own identity is necessary for SSPs' roles to promote safety for students.

Ties to identity

The principle of ties to identity involves being aware of one's own identities and the identities of others' and how they impact learning, experiences, and development. SSPs provided noteworthy examples of ties to student's identities from a social awareness perspective. Few SSPs made connections to their own identities, although they were prompted in both modules to reflect on their own personal identities. For example, some SSPs answered just "No," or "N/A" when asked if they are members of a majority or privileged and/or minority or marginalized group, suggesting that more work is needed with practicing self-awareness. However, some SSPs provided explicit and salient examples of how their identities impact their work. When reflecting on her identity and self-awareness, one African American SSP shared how both her individual and collective identity play an important role when connecting with her students, and how her identities relate to both self and social awareness, showing how ties to identity cannot be overlooked in the application of SEL. Specifically, she expressed:

> I'm a member of a minority and marginalized group. Definitely, I'm an African American female and we have been pushed to the limit for almost 400 years since slavery. And that's due to modern day slavery and oppression that we continue to go through. I'm a very balanced individual

> so that allows me to recognize myself and social awareness when relating to my students. (SSP34, SEL, T4)

Another SSP provided an example of social awareness to express why identity is important and how it relates to relationship skills:

> I always consider a staff/student's identity because of how I was raised, you should consider race, religion, health/physical, knowing these things can determine the outcome. example: some west Indian students don't look adults in their eyes as a sign of respect, in different cases some might its rude. but when [you] understand their background you can respond back better. (SSP26, CC, T7)

In an example of social awareness, another SSP illustrated how understanding ties to identity can encourage advocacy:

> I remember a time when two boys were picking on a Muslim girl that had a veil on her head. I explained to them that [it] was part of her culture. I should have made them do some research on her culture and bring the findings back so we could have discussed their findings. (SSP13, CC, T7)

This comment also suggests that ties to identity should be a continuous concept. In this example, this SSP wished they followed up with these two boys and continued to advocate for the Muslim girl. These comments demonstrated that ties to identity are related to self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and advocacy.

Advocacy

The principle of advocacy in this context is defined as deliberate, intentional, and continuous actions for promoting and advancing equity and inclusion. Like the other transformative SEL principles, advocacy overlapped with multiple social emotional competencies and other transformative SEL principles. These examples demonstrate how SSPs can and do position themselves to advocate and connect with their students by highlighting inequitable school policies. This underscores why SSPs need to advocate for their students to promote equity and inclusion in schools. For example, one SSP said, "A Muslim student who was told she had to dress out during PE like the rest of the kids. After speaking to parents and administrators her uniform was modified and she was allowed to participate in gym activities." (SSP27, CC, T7). This example also represents the distinction between equality and equity: equality entails requiring all students to wear the same physical education (PE) uniforms while allowing modified PE uniforms to respect a student's religious identity is an example of equity. Another SSP mentioned:

It connects with my work by building a relationship with the students, an adults word to the student is gold, for example students at our [school] have to be in uniform, understand I work at an behavior school, and a lot of the kids don't have the money to get uniforms, or they only have one. When out of uniform you have to go to Internal Suspension, I made an agreement, with them you go to I.S. for one period without causing a scene, I'll get a school shirt for the day, so you can go to regular classes. They do their part and I keep my word, and we have a good connection and they have a good day knowing we care. (SSP31, SEL, T9)

These examples illuminate why advocacy needs to be continual to promote equity. It also reflects why transformative SEL competencies are necessary in SSPs' work. As mentioned, discipline serves as a significant barrier to equitable education for many students. Training and involving security staff in these processes empowers them to become advocates for students, ensuring they all benefit from a safe and inclusive learning environment.

DISCUSSION

This study helps address an important gap in the literature by elevating the voices of SSPs as it relates to their knowledge and experiences with transformative SEL. To our knowledge, there is no previous research that considers the experiences of SSPs as it relates to CC or SEL skills. The authors suggest that this contribution fills an important gap to deepen related conversations and perspectives on the role of SSPs in supporting transformative SEL. In addition to its novelty for centering the experiences of SSPs, this study is also one of the first to specifically address qualitative data from a transformative SEL lens. Understanding the experiences of SSPs as key staff in the school community helps us ensure that school security staff are included in conversations around SEL as a tool for improving school safety and educational equity.

This study sought to address two research questions: (1) How do SSPs describe SEL? and (2) How have SSPs applied principles of transformative SEL in their work with students? Participant responses were able to provide context about how SSPs defined SEL. The modules also provided SSPs with language to define skills they had used in their work but may previously have been unable to articulate. Several SSPs were able to highlight ways they have used principles of transformative SEL with students and ways they could envision these skills being useful in the future. Responses from SSPs highlighted the value of systemic schoolwide SEL interventions and emphasized the transformative SEL principles of working collaboratively, equity and inclusion, cultural humility, ties to identity, and advocacy. Specifically, involving students in the decision-making process and working collaboratively with other adults at school provides SSPs

and students with additional opportunities to strengthen their social emotional skills. This aligns with the literature that states that SEL is the most effective when it is implemented schoolwide with buy-in from numerous stakeholders, including support staff such as security (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2021).

Participants also discussed elements of cultural humility and ties to identity which assisted SSPs and other adults in managing student behaviors with compassion by recognizing that their identity, experiences, and culture may not be the same as their students. This practice can help strengthen relationships and mitigate the exclusionary forms of punitive discipline experienced by students with disabilities and students of Color by understanding and considering the unique lived experiences of these groups (Haynes-Mendez & Engelsmeier, 2020). However, few SSPs made connections to their own identities, even though they were prompted in both modules to reflect on their own personal identities. For example, some SSPs answered just "No," or "N/A" when asked if they are members of a majority/privileged and/or minority/marginalized group, suggesting that more work is needed with practicing self-awareness. Understanding that people's core identities impact how they view and relate to the world can help SSPs effectively manage their own behaviors and emotions which, in turn, promotes coregulation and positively impacts their relationships with students (Williams & Jagers, 2020). After understanding the importance of identity and practicing cultural humility, SSPs may be better equipped to identify and address inequities. SSPs also mentioned specific experiences with equity, inclusion, and advocacy. Several respondents recalled incidents in which a student was being excluded or targeted for an individual identity and how they were able to assess the situation and effectively intervene to help the student. It is important for SSPs and all adults in schools to communicate often and listen to the needs and feedback of their students rather than taking a reactive approach. This is especially true when considering the influence and power that school security staff have on student discipline outcomes. When school security and other staff understand and practice each of these principles, they are best equipped to understand and advocate for their students, potentially mitigating the harms caused to students through exclusionary forms of punitive discipline (e.g., zero tolerance).

While many SSPs had an understanding of CC and SEL, some participants demonstrated a need for additional SEL with culturally relevant information that can help them further develop their self-awareness as well as initiatives that facilitate working collaboratively with other adults. It is essential for SSPs and other adults to self-reflect on their identities to ensure that they are engaging with SEL in a way that constantly promotes equity and inclusion to protect the marginalized students they serve and encourage a safe learning community. All adults in schools can promote equity through self-awareness of identity and biases, especially when staff demographics are not reflective of the student population. Despite the level of knowledge SSPs currently

possess it is important to provide ongoing evidence-based practices and the opportunities to develop these skills. Given that culture is constantly evolving, all adults in school, including SSPs should be given access to transformative SEL training. School safety depends on strong SEL competencies to advocate for the physical and psychological safety of all students.

Study limitations

While this study provides valuable insight into school security perspectives, it is not without limitations. First, it is important to contextualize the participants in this study. While the district highly encouraged participation, it was not mandatory resulting in individuals volunteering to participate. Unlike teachers and other school staff who are accustomed to PD and required to complete PD to maintain their credentials, security personnel do not typically receive PD or continuing education. Although participation was high during the in-person training, completion of all modules after the training was low. Additionally, those who chose to participate in the modules may be more invested in these topics and may already be leaders in their school related to these topics, and as a result may not be representative of the current level of transformative SEL skills being used by school security. Also, individuals may not have had the opportunity to participate based on scheduling or other logistical reasons, potentially biasing the sample. The significant attrition is also a limitation: only 18 out of the 48 SSPs reached and completed the final CC module. Also, a major limitation of this paper is the inability to provide demographic data on the 48 SSPs in this study, especially because only 18 of these SSPs completed the training in its entirety. In comparison, 96 SSPs were in the larger study and 60 of these SSPs completed the first module. It is important to note that because the demographics of the SSPs were diverse and reflective of the district's student body, this may have impacted the way that SSPs and students engaged related to SEL and CC. Future studies should assess perspectives from other types of samples, particularly because most security staff are White males. The participants present at the in-person training expressed difficulty navigating the module due to a lack of technological familiarity (Espelage et al., 2021). Because the responses/reflections analyzed in this study were anonymous, researchers were unable to follow-up or ask for SSPs to expand upon or clarify these comments. Finally, these modules were administered before CASEL updating their definition of SEL; therefore, participants did not receive SEL training that was specific to issues of equity and inclusion. However, much of this information was incorporated into the CC module.

Recommendations for future research, practice, policy, and systemic SEL adoption

Ultimately, the gradual shift toward systemic and transformative SEL should involve every adult in a school that interacts with students. While the responses from SSPs indicate some knowledge surrounding the concepts and use of transformative SEL, there is additional work that must be conducted to effectively implement systemic SEL. CASEL created a six-step framework for school districts to support the successful implementation and adoption of systemic SEL (Oberle et al., 2016). These steps from Oberle et al. (2016) are presented below in bold and a description based on authors' interpretations of SSPs' responses is added as to how the step is relevant for SSPs' role in transformative SEL.

Step 1: Establish a shared vision for SEL among all stakeholders within a school

Implementing systemic SEL requires effort and support of an interdisciplinary team of teachers, students, parents, and school staff because it is most effective when it considers the experiences and perceptions of the broader school community (Oberle et al., 2016). Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2021) recommends building a diverse SEL team who works collaboratively to build a shared understanding and community surrounding SEL, emphasizing the importance of support staff who can see students from varying perspectives. SSPs have a high level of contact with students and a significant impact on the disciplinary process; therefore, it is fundamental that they be included in the SEL teams at their schools to have a voice in disciplinary measures, as well as to develop strong collaborative relationships with school stakeholders. Future research could explore the long-term relationships SSPs have with other school personnel and school stakeholders over time.

Step 2: Assess the needs and available resources for schoolwide SEL implementation

SEL teams involved in implementing schoolwide SEL should identify the existing resources that can serve as building blocks for comprehensive strategies and extensive implementation. A diverse SEL team that includes SSPs can benefit from their unique understanding and application of SEL as it relates to discipline. Collectively, the SEL team can measure strengths and weaknesses in the foundation of their school-wide strategies to create a strong baseline for future SEL programming. Future research could assess the degree to which SSPs are integrated into schoolwide SEL programming such as at the strategic planning level at the district.

Step 3: Provide ongoing and embedded professional learning in SEL instruction

Policymakers and state officials should increase funding for the development, evaluation, and dissemination of evidence-based transformative SEL PD nationwide for all school staff. At the school level, individual SEL teams can distribute schoolwide PD in SEL to all staff,

including SSPs. SSPs in this study did not seem as accustomed to online PD in this didactic manner. Future research could explore additional methods of delivery for ongoing PD for SSPs. It is imperative that SSPs are included in not only conversations about implementation but also supported in continuing their own education.

Step 4: Adopt evidence-based SEL programming and incorporate it in educational practices

In addition to adults in the school being trained in effective SEL techniques, SEL must be integrated into the curriculum and schools' educational practices to permeate and abolish systemic inequities. SEL can be incorporated through both formal and informal interactions with students and will be more successful if it is woven into the students overall educational experiences (Ferreira et al., 2020). Given their involvement in school violence prevention and intervention, SSPs have the potential to ensure SEL skills are incorporated into school discipline practices to promote equity. Future research could assess the degree to which SEL is incorporated into the curriculum and strategic plans for the school and/or district.

Step 5: Integrate SEL into everyday practices at school

Two common issues with SEL programming are fragmented implementation and over-focusing on the classroom (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Few programs have a complete approach to implementation that focuses on both academics and the social aspects of school (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). For example, disciplinary measures rarely include elements of SEL and restorative practices, such as nurturing relationships, facilitating dialog, and emphasizing harm done rather than rules broken (Vaandering, 2014). SSPs are well-positioned to utilize these practices in their work because they are full-time school district employees, typically unarmed, and work exclusively with students and school personnel (Espelage et al., 2021).

Step 6: Conduct continuous cycles of inquiry to facilitate improvement

Finally, fidelity checking is crucial to successful implementation, and systemic schoolwide SEL programming requires sustained efforts that are adapted as school climates and students evolve. Creating metrics to ensure that staff and security personnel alike do not drift from the established practices supports the goal of fidelity and continuous improvement. This includes regular booster training for all staff on how to best relate to students with a variety of identities and needs. Future research could examine SEL programming for districts over time in relation to both SSP, school staff, and student outcomes of interest (i.e., social and

emotional competencies, nonpunitive disciplinary practices, school sense of belonging).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a schoolwide emphasis on SEL, particularly one that emphasizes CC and equity, is essential to the successful academic and social development of students. By training SSPs to employ these strategies, schools can effectively involve a multifaceted team in assessing and addressing needs for SEL implementation. By educating and including the often-underrepresented school security population, schools will have a more balanced perspective and can work toward creating meaningful relationships that emphasize inclusion and identity in every aspect of the educational context, while also working to keep students physically and psychologically safe.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.